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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/RA, NEA/IPA, OES/IHA, OES/ENV, OES/STC AND  
OES/PCI  
STATE PASS USAID FOR EGAT/AG/IP AND ANE/MEA  
HHS FOR STEIGER AND PASS FOGARTY CENTER  
INTERIOR FOR USGS/INTERNATIONAL  
EPA FOR INTERNATIONAL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: GAZA NGO LEADER DESCRIBES HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT  
CHALLENGES

Sensitive but unclassified - please handle accordingly.

1. (SBU) Summary: According to Jamal Safi, chairman of the Environmental Protection and Research Institute (EPRI) and winner of the prestigious Zayed International Prize for the Environment, key health and environmental challenges for Gaza include blood-borne infectious diseases, lead poisoning, misuse of pesticides, solid waste management and disposal, sewage and wastewater treatment, and water scarcity. Safi stressed the importance of involving NGO's in efforts to resolve health and environmental problems in Gaza. End summary.

The Environmental Protection and Research Institute

2. (U) EPRI was established in 1989 and registered officially in 1991 as a nonprofit nongovernmental organization and an independent institute in the Gaza Strip. The institute was founded by a group of Palestinian scientists dedicated to protection of the environment and the public interest through applied research and public awareness efforts. EPRI is focused on research and development in public health, environment, and agriculture and the promotion of environmental planning, effective management strategies, awareness, education, public and expert information, monitoring, and pollution control. EPRI has carried out joint research with outstanding U.S., European, Israeli, Egyptian, and Jordanian academic institutions. It is a repeat grant recipient under the USAID Middle East Regional Cooperation Program (MERC). EPRI's 30-member consulting committee includes experts in agriculture, public health, environmental health, public awareness, education, management, pesticide chemistry and toxicology, neurotoxicology, pharmacology, microbiology, biochemistry, physiology, organic chemistry and medical technology.

Health Risks in Gaza: Infectious Diseases, Lead Poisoning

3. (SBU) Dr. Safi discussed Gaza health and environmental challenges with ESTH Officer over lunch in Tel Aviv June 23. The most serious infectious diseases are blood-borne, including Hepatitis B and C. Hepatitis B infected six percent of blood donors in 1994-95. That rate is now down to three percent due to efforts by EPRI. The Hepatitis C infection rate has dropped from 2.6 to less than 0.5 percent over the same period. EPRI trained Ministry of Health staff in analysis of Hepatitis, provided presentations and lectures to doctors and blood technicians, and carried out community education and outreach to stem the spread of these diseases by discouraging at-risk behaviors. EPRI and others also focused on clans and extended families where infection rates were sometimes as high as 50-60 percent. Safi said that had been no new AIDS cases since 1993 in Gaza; all those infected with AIDS before that time had died.

3. (SBU) Major sources of lead exposure in Gaza include smelters, battery factories (manufacturing and recycling), radiator repair shops, used lead-based paints, leaded gasoline, and flour from stone mills. Point exposures include occupational and industrial settings, and use of a particular input to cosmetics. EPRI has carried out a pilot study on lead poisoning among children, together with the CDC and Hebrew University. They discovered a 17.2 percent rate of lead poisoning among children in "hot spot," areas with high concentrations of lead. The overall rate was approximately five percent. Children of lead-exposed workers are also at high risk for lead poisoning. The Ministry of Health does not carry out any lead poisoning analysis, Safi said. EPRI and Ben Gurion University are preparing a full MERC proposal to examine hot spot risks.

Health Risks from Use of Pesticides

14. (SBU) Safi said that Gazans faced health risks due to the over- and misuse of pesticides. This situation exists both in the Palestinian areas of Gaza and in the Israeli settlements, in the latter due to intensive agriculture in particular. EPRI had detected levels in fruits and vegetables exceeding international standards. Monitoring of pesticide levels in both water and soil was sorely needed. There appeared to be a correlation between pesticide levels and growing incidences of cancers in a 1990-99 study of over 5,000 cases. EPRI and Israel's Agricultural Research Office are preparing a MERC proposal to monitor pesticide residue levels in soils in Israel and Gaza. Safi noted that the ability to control pesticide levels will affect Gaza's ability to export produce.

#### Environmental Problems

15. (SBU) Safi said that solid waste disposal was a major problem in Gaza due to a lack of sanitary landfill capacity and the absence of a plan for managing solid waste. Gazans produce about 1,000 tons of new solid waste every day, he said. He favored construction of a major incinerator at a cost of USD 10-20 as the best solution because burning off solid waste would produce electricity and there was not enough land in overpopulated Gaza to dispose of the waste indefinitely. As a second-best option, he favored recycling and composting. Safi noted that Gaza had lots of flies due to solid waste and mosquitoes because of untreated and uncontained sewage.

16. (SBU) Safi stated that there is not enough sewage treatment capacity in Gaza, especially in Khan Yunis. There are three large-scale collecting pools, not enough to meet the needs of the population. Sewage not held in those pools typically flows into the sea or collects on the ground. He estimated that USD 200 million is needed to resolve Gaza's sewage problem, above and beyond assistance projects already on the drawing board. The sewage problem adds to levels of heavy metals, nitrates and pesticides in soils and ground water.

#### Water: High Salinity, Contamination, Shortage

17. (SBU) Safi said that Gaza faced a water deficit of 40-60 million cubic meters (MCM) per year. (Note: Most experts accept the figure of 60 MCM. End note). The WHO standard for nitrates in water is 45 parts per million (PPM), but some producing wells in Gaza have concentrations as high as 100 PPM. Other wells have concentrations of chlorides as high as 1,000 PPM, Safi said. Some wells used for drinking water even exceed the contamination standards for agricultural use. Producing wells requiring treatment to make them suitable for use are not getting it. Safi stated that Gaza was suffering from an inability to exercise Palestinian rights to water from aquifers shared with Israel. He said that Israel proper and Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories receive about 500 MCM from the shared aquifers, while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza receive only 150 MCM. In particular, he said that Israeli dams along the Wadi Gaza, which flows from Israel into the Gaza Strip, were capturing up to 20 MCM that had reached Gaza in the past. He also said that Israel "was overpumping from wells near the border with Gaza to make the Negev green," depriving the coastal aquifer under Gaza of those supplies. (Comment: Israeli and Palestinian sources differ on the extent each uses shared aquifers and Israeli capture of runoff that could benefit Gaza. The estimate of 20 MCM of previous supplies from the Wadi Gaza is probably high. MFA Water Issues Director has promised ESTH Officer a briefing July 11 on Israeli data and perspectives on shared aquifers and watersheds; regardless of the accuracy of Safi's estimates, the scarcity of high-quality affordable water in Gaza is clearly a health, environment and economic issue. End comment).

#### Role of NGO's in Resolving Environment-related Problems in Gaza

18. (SBU) ESTH Officer and Safi touched briefly on the pending resumption of meetings of the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Environmental Experts Committee, suspended since the beginning of the recent Intifada. Underlining his institute's success in addressing health problems and its ability to work effectively with outside parties, including Israeli institutions, Safi said that the international community should look to NGO's in Gaza and the West Bank as an important avenue for addressing problems related to the environment. He said not only could NGO's assist greatly with the areas of environment, public health and agriculture that are the focus of his institute, but that problems in those areas should be addressed through regional cooperation as well.

19. (SBU) Bio Note: Jamal Safi was born in the Jabalia Refugee Camp in Gaza in 1957. He has a PhD in Chemistry and Toxicology of Pesticides from the Faculty of Agriculture of

Alexandria University. Safi has managed to work effectively with a range of international partners, including Israelis and Americans, despite political turmoil in Gaza. He stated that he got Chairman Arafat to instruct the Health Ministry to work with EPRI to control Hepatitis, and that he had a personal connection with PA President Abbas as well. Safi won the Zayed International Prize for the Environment in 2003 for environmental action leading to change in society.

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